

The AI Bootcamp

3

Ask it something that actually pays off this week

In this chapter you'll learn

One test that sorts any task, the 4 kinds worth handing over now, and the 4 that are still yours

The AI Bootcamp

THE PROBLEM

Most AI education is a pile of disconnected tips. A LinkedIn carousel here, a YouTube tutorial there, a \$2,000 cohort course that goes out of date before the refund window closes. None of it is built to be read in order, so nothing compounds. You finish twelve videos and can recite twelve facts, not perform one new skill.

THE FIX

The AI Bootcamp is built the other way. 90 skills, packed 2 to 3 per chapter, 36 chapters, 3 tracks. Every chapter states what it needs from you and what it hands to the chapter after it, so skill 47 only works because skill 12 already landed. Read it in order and by the end you are not collecting facts about AI, you are running work through it.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

We built this because we kept meeting smart people who felt behind on AI for no reason other than nobody had organized the material for them.

This book does not assume you are technical, and it does not water anything down either. Every chapter earns its place: a real skill, a real exercise, a one-page companion you can flip back to in month three when you have forgotten the details but still need the answer.

If a chapter loses you, or a chapter changes how you work, I want to hear about it either way.

Kris

Editor, AI Central

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THE 3 TRACKS

AI 101

Get running

Pick a tool, set it up, write a clear instruction, use it safely at work.

AI 202

Prompt properly

The framework behind every good instruction, and catching AI when it is wrong.

AI 303

Build without watching it

Connect AI to your tools, and automations that run while you are not looking.

IN THIS LESSON YOU'LL LEARN

By the end of this chapter you can sort any task on your desk into work worth handing over and work to keep, in about 10 seconds and without knowing anything about how the tool works. You will know the 4 families that pay off this week, the 4 that still disappoint, and you will have handed over 3 real tasks.

The first month is where people quit, and they quit for a specific reason: they were told AI can do everything, so they pointed it at the hardest thing on their desk, got a confident answer they could not check, and concluded the whole category was oversold. The fix is not more enthusiasm. It is a sorting rule that tells you which task to try first.

CONTENTS	3.1	The usual question sorts nothing
	3.2	4 kinds of work pay off in your first week
	3.3	The work you keep is not the hard work
	3.4	Hand over the work, keep the judgement

TOPICS REQUIRED

Chapter 2. You need your account open and the one real conversation you have already had. You also need a rough memory of what you actually spent last week doing, which the exercises will ask you to write down.

AFTER THIS CHAPTER

Chapter 4 assumes you have handed over 3 real tasks and seen at least one answer come back almost right. It works on what you do next with that answer, which is where most of the value turns out to be.

3.1 The usual question sorts nothing

You are back at the empty box with nothing to type. The problem is not that you lack ideas. It is that the only advice on offer is that AI can do everything, and a tool recommended for every task gives you no way to pick a first one.

Can it do this?

The question everyone asks. It sorts nothing, because the answer is always yes.

TRAITS

- It attempts every task you type into it
- A wrong answer arrives in the same tone as a right one
- Refusals are rare, and almost never mean it cannot

PROS

- + Takes no effort to ask
- + Something always comes back

CONS

- Gives you no signal at all
- You learn it was the wrong task after you have sent the result

Can I check it?

The question that sorts. Weigh checking the answer against doing the work yourself.

TRAITS

- Checking is quick when you already hold the material
- Checking is slow when the facts sit outside what you know
- Checking is impossible when the output is a judgement call

PROS

- + Runs in about 10 seconds on any task
- + Still works on tools that do not exist yet

CONS

- Only honest if you admit what you would really check
- Sometimes the answer is do it yourself

Fig 3.1 Two questions you can ask before handing something over. Only one of them can come back "no", which is the only reason it is worth asking.

3.1

It never says no. Willingness is not capability. Nothing in the reply tells you the task was a bad fit.

The edge is jagged. Two tasks that look equally hard can sit on opposite sides of what it does well. Lists of what it can do go stale. A test does not.

The test. Would checking the answer take you less time than producing it? If yes, hand it over.

Here is what happens in week one, to almost everyone. The first conversation goes well, you close the tab pleased with yourself, and on Monday morning you open the box again and cannot think what to type.

That is not a failure of imagination. It is that every piece of advice you have been given says AI can do everything, which is the same as no advice at all. A tool recommended for all tasks equally gives you nothing to choose between them.

The tool will not help you here either. Type any task into any of the 4 assistants and it will attempt it. It attempts the things it is genuinely excellent at and the things it has no business touching in the same tone, at the same speed, with the same composure. Refusals are rare and almost never mean it cannot. So "can it do this" sorts nothing at all.

Researchers gave 758 management consultants a set of realistic tasks, some with an assistant and some without. On the tasks that sat inside what the AI was good at, the ones using it completed about 12% more work, roughly 25% faster, at noticeably higher quality. On one task deliberately built to sit just outside that boundary, the consultants using AI got it right 19 percentage points less often than the ones working alone. To the people doing them, both tasks looked equally sensible to hand over.

So a list of what it is good at cannot save you, and any such list is out of date within months anyway. What you need is a test you can run yourself, on any task, knowing nothing about how the thing works. There is one, and it takes about 10 seconds.

Ask how long it would take you to check the answer, against how long it takes you to do the work. If checking is faster, hand it over. If checking is slower, or if you are honest with yourself and know you would not check at all, keep it. The rest of this chapter is that one question, applied to the work actually on your desk.

3.2 4 kinds of work pay off in your first week

None of these are impressive. All of them are things you did last week. And all 4 share one property that is the real reason they work.

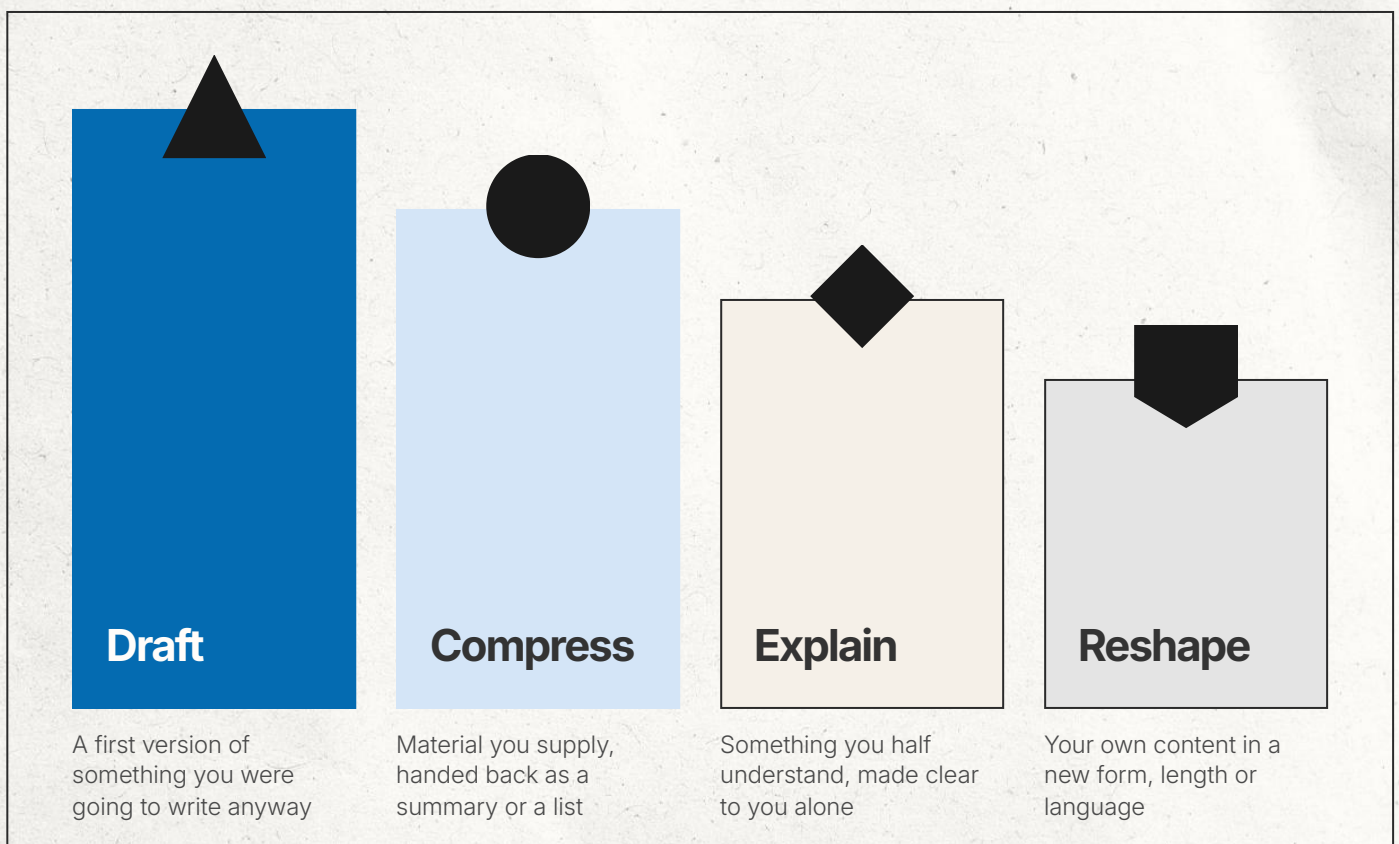


Fig 3.2 The 4 that pay off now. The heights are visual rhythm, not a ranking: what these have in common is that you already hold the material, so the check is fast.

3.2

What links them. In all 4 you already hold the material, or you are the only person who has to accept the result.

Go small deliberately. A 10-minute job you do every week beats an ambitious one you do once a quarter.

Cheap to check is not no check. You still read it. Chapter 8 turns that into a 30-second habit.

Four families of work pass the checking test for nearly everyone, nearly every time. Not one of them is impressive, which is exactly why they work.

Drafts first. Anything where the expensive part is the blank page rather than the thinking: the recruiting note, the update nobody reads, the agenda, the write-up of a call you were on. This is where the measured gains are largest. In a controlled experiment, 453 professionals were given the kind of writing their own jobs actually involve, press releases, short reports, analysis plans, delicate emails. The group with an assistant took 40% less time and their work was rated 18% better. You are not asking it to write the thing. You are asking it to get you past the empty screen and into editing, which is the part you are good at.

Compression next. You paste in the material and ask for the shape: the summary, the 5 points, the list of what actually needs a decision. Checking is cheap because you are holding the source. Its weakness here is not invention, it is omission, and it tends to over-weight whatever it read last, so the middle of a long document is where things go missing. Chapter 18 makes this a proper method. This week, read the summary back against the document once.

Explanation third, and this one is underrated. Take something you half understand and have been nodding along to for a year: a clause in a contract, a metric your finance team quotes, how a system your company bought last year actually works. You are the only audience, and you can feel when it lands, so the cost of checking is close to nothing. Ask for it twice, once in plain terms and once as it would be put to someone in your role.

Reshaping fourth. Same content, new form. Your scribbled notes into an email. A long email into 5 bullets. Prose into a table. English into French for a client who would rather read French. The content came from you, so the check is a single question: does it still say what I said?

What connects these 4 is not difficulty. It is that in each one you already hold the material, or you are the only person who has to accept the result. That is what makes the check fast, and the fast check is the entire reason they pay off in week one.

3.3 The work you keep is not the hard work

This is the list almost nobody publishes, and its absence is why the first month disappoints people. Read it carefully: not one of these is kept because the task is difficult.

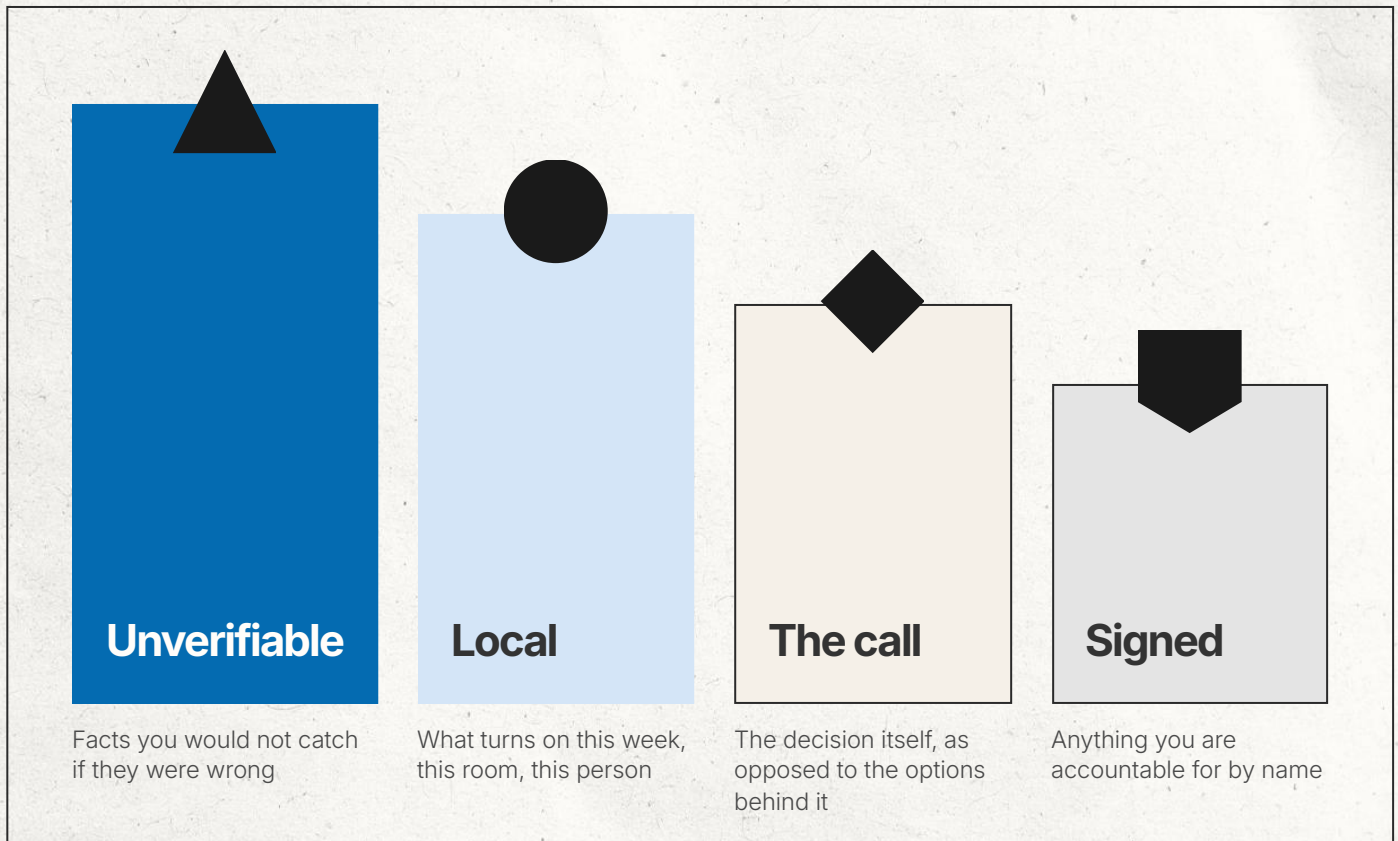


Fig 3.3 The same shape as the figure before it, on purpose: this is the other half of one sort. Heights are rhythm, not severity. Note that difficulty is not what puts anything on this list.

3.3

This list moves. It describes September 2026, and 2 of the 4 are shifting. The reasoning is the part worth keeping.

The tell. If you cannot say how you would know the answer was wrong, you are not ready to hand that task over.

It lands on someone else. Unchecked output passed to a colleague costs them their afternoon, and costs you their opinion of you.

The list of what to keep is more useful than the list of what to hand over, and it is the one nobody writes down. Here it is, in the state it is actually in this autumn.

Keep anything where the answer has to be right and you would not be able to tell that it was not. Figures you cannot recompute, a citation you are not going to open, a specific detail about a named person, company, contract or regulation. It is at its most fluent precisely where you are least equipped to check, which is the worst possible pairing. Courts around the world have now recorded more than 1,500 decisions involving filings that cited cases which do not exist, submitted by professionals who never opened the citation. Chapter 8 gives you the habit that prevents this. Until then, treat anything specific and checkable as unverified.

Keep anything that turns on this week, this room, or this person. It does not know what was said in Tuesday's meeting, who is quietly furious about the reorganisation, what your client asked for in March, or which of two colleagues you should route this through. Some assistants can search the web. None of them can search your company. You can close part of that gap by pasting the context in yourself, which is Chapter 7, but it does not close on its own.

Keep the decision. It will hand you a recommendation instantly and with complete conviction, then quietly reverse it if you push back, because these systems are built to agree with the person in front of them. A second opinion that folds the moment you frown is not a second opinion. Use it to lay out the options, the costs and the thing you have not thought of. Then decide yourself. Getting it to argue back properly is Chapter 21.

Keep anything you are accountable for by name, and the relationship wrapped around it. The apology. The performance conversation. The note to a colleague whose father has just died. The message to a client you have known for 9 years. It can produce words for all of these, and the words were never the point: the fact that you wrote them is.

There is one cost of getting this wrong that is easy to miss, because it lands on somebody else. In a survey of 1,004 desk workers, 40% said that in the past month they had been sent AI-generated work that looked finished and was not, and each instance took them close to 2 hours to sort out. Half of them thought less of the colleague who sent it. Time you save this way is often just time moved onto someone else, and they can usually tell.

3.4 Hand over the work, keep the judgement

One test, run in about 10 seconds, on 3 real tasks sitting on your desk right now. Read the rule from the top and stop at the first line that is true.

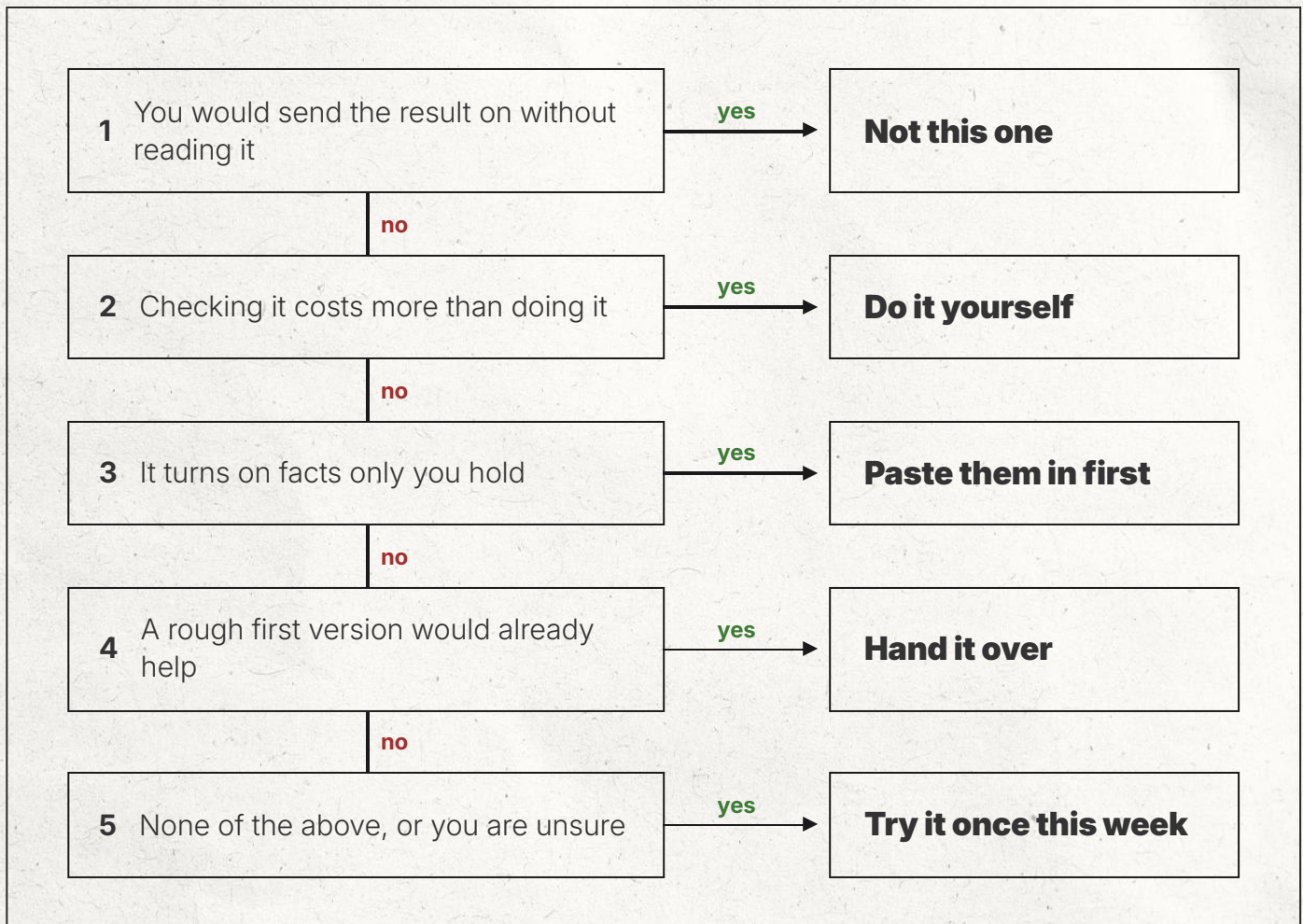


Fig 3.4 The triage rule. Row 1 disqualifies more tasks than the other 4 put together, and notice it is a question about you rather than about the tool.

3.4

The one line. Hand over the work. Keep the judgement. Nearly every task splits into those two parts.

Aim low on purpose. 3 small wins this week will change how you work. 1 ambitious failure closes the tab for a month.

Write down the misses. The tasks that disappoint you are the map. Chapter 12 turns the ones that worked into a routine.

The rule opposite is this chapter in one figure. Run it top to bottom on any task and stop at the first line that is true of it.

When the figure is not in front of you, one line carries it: hand over the work, keep the judgement. Almost every task splits into those two parts, and the split is rarely where people expect. Writing the memo is work. Deciding what the memo should conclude is judgement. Pulling the 5 themes out of 40 pages of survey comments is work. Choosing which theme your team acts on is judgement. You will find both halves inside a task you were about to hand over whole.

Aim lower than you want to. The instinct is to test it on something impressive, the strategy paper or the board deck, because that is where the pain is. That is the worst possible first pick: it is the task where you can least afford to be wrong and can least easily check. Take the 10-minute thing you do every Thursday instead.

One more thing worth knowing before you choose. The measured gains from these tools are consistently largest for people who are new to a task and smallest for people who are already fast and good at it. In a study of more than 5,000 support agents, the average gain was 14%, it was 34% for the newest agents, and it was close to nothing for the most experienced ones. So point it at the work you are slowest at, or least confident in, rather than at the thing you are already known for. That is the opposite of what most people try first.

Pick 3 tasks now, from work actually sitting on your desk this week, and hand them over before Friday. Then write down what you had to fix in each one, because that is where the next chapter starts.

READING ENDS HERE

Everything before was reading. Everything after is doing.

3 exercises, About 20 minutes and one real decision that opens Chapter 4.

Do these before Chapter 4

3 exercises. About 20 minutes

Think back over last week at work and split it into two columns. Be specific: name the actual document, email or meeting, not the category.

A ROUGH FIRST VERSION WOULD HAVE HELPED

ONLY YOU COULD HAVE DONE IT

Take one item from the left column and run the test out loud. How many minutes to do it yourself? How many minutes to check an answer someone handed you? Write both numbers, then write which one wins.

Hand that task over now, in your own words, in the account you opened in Chapter 2. Then write one sentence on what you had to fix before it was usable.

Chapter 3 on one page

THE SORTING QUESTION

Not "can it do this", which is always yes, but "can I check the answer faster than I could do the work"

HAND OVER NOW

Draft (a first version) · Compress (material you supply) · Explain (to yourself) · Reshape (your own content, new form). All 4 are cheap to check because you already hold the material

KEEP FOR YOURSELF

Facts you could not catch if they were wrong · anything turning on this week, this room, this person · the decision itself · anything you are accountable for by name

THE RULE IN ONE LINE

Hand over the work, keep the judgement. And point it at what you are slowest at, not what you are best at

NEEDED BEFORE CHAPTER 4

3 tasks actually handed over, and a note on what each one got wrong

BRING TO CHAPTER 4

The 3 tasks you handed over and the note on what you had to fix in each. Chapter 4 works on the answer that comes back almost right, which is the most common outcome and the one that makes people give up.

BOTTOM LINE

You can sort any task at your desk into hand it over or keep it, and this week you have done both.

NEXT CHAPTER

Keep the conversation going

Chapter 4 fixes the thing that stops most people: the first answer is close but not right, and they start again from scratch instead of replying. It covers following up, steering an answer towards what you actually wanted, and why one thread per topic makes the difference.

BRING WITH YOU

- ☐ The 3 tasks you handed over in this chapter
- ☐ The one answer that came back almost right

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